

Insight 8

Could There Be Hunger in America?

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The economic expansion that began in March 1991 has been widely touted as the longest peacetime expansion of the last 50 years. By implication, all Americans should be enjoying rising household incomes and expanded economic opportunities. Unemployment is at its lowest rate in more than two decades. Earned income tax credits are available for the working poor, and food assistance is available to all citizens living in low-income households. Could there still be hunger in a land where economic times are so good and there is help for the needy?¹

Hunger Count

According to a national survey taken in 1995, a year marked by good economic news, hunger existed among persons in 4.2 million households, that is 4.1 percent of all U.S. households. These households had one or more persons that reported experiencing reduced food intake because of a lack of financial resources. Nearly 20 percent of households (817,000 of the 4.2 million) had one or more members who experienced severe hunger. In some of these households, children experienced reduced food intake (332,000) or, where

no children were present, adults experienced a prolonged lack of food, including going without food for a whole day.

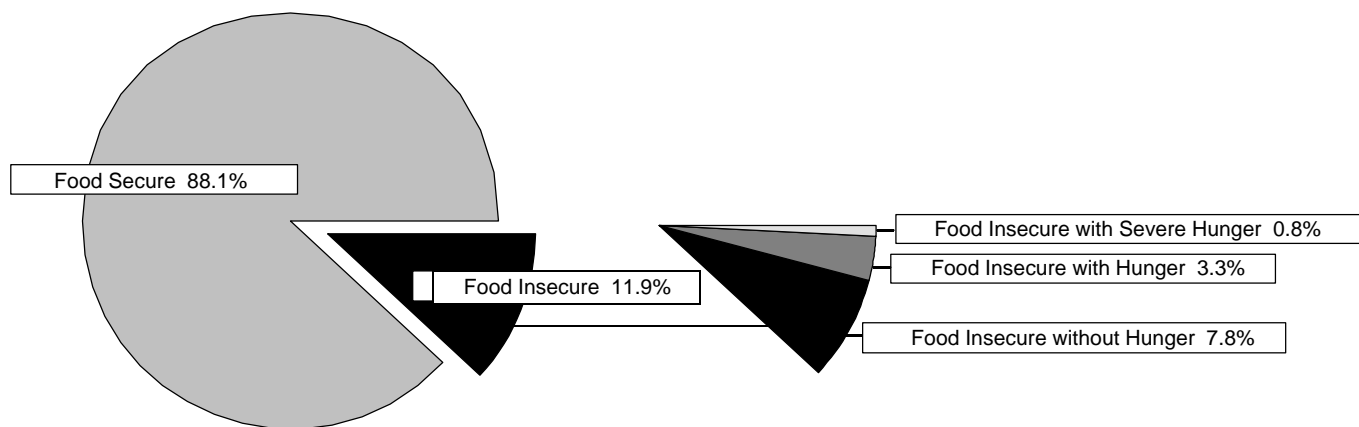
A larger group of households, including households experiencing hunger and those at-risk of hunger, was classified as food insecure. This larger group totaled 11.9 million households, about 12 percent of all U.S. households. Those who were food insecure but not hungry, which accounted for 7.8 percent of all households, were concerned about the adequacy, quality, and variety of their household's food, but did not report sustained reductions in food intake (see figure).

Not all households are equally likely to be hungry. A slightly larger proportion of households with children were classified as experiencing hunger. Black and Hispanic households with children were about twice as likely to be classified as experiencing hunger as their White counterparts. Female-headed households were four times more likely to experience hunger than husband-wife households. The lower a household's income, the higher the chance of experiencing hunger (see table).

The count of hungry people was obtained through a scientific survey conducted by the U.S. Bureau of the Census and sponsored by the USDA's Food and Nutrition Service (FNS). FNS administers the Nation's food assistance programs, with annual expenditures of almost \$40 billion.

¹Hunger is the uneasy or painful sensation caused by a lack of food. It can result from the recurrent and involuntary lack of access to food. Severe hunger exists in households when children go hungry or adults experience prolonged or acute hunger. Hunger is a potential although not necessary consequence of food insecurity. Food insecurity is used to describe inadequate access to enough food at all times for a healthy, active life. It can be a warning sign for hunger. Malnutrition and related diseases are not addressed in these definitions.

Prevalence of Food Security and Hunger in U.S. Households, 1995



Source: Hamilton et al., 1997, *Household Food Security in the United States*, Food and Consumer Service, Alexandria, VA.

The agency's interest in measuring hunger arises from its legal mandate to serve those who meet the requirements for assistance programs. These include the Food Stamp Program, the Special Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants and Children (WIC), and the National School Lunch Program.

Food Assistance and Hunger

About half the households that reported experiencing hunger received food assistance in the month before the interview. This included households participating in the Food Stamp Program and those receiving WIC benefits. The relationship between hunger and food assistance is complex. Although the benefits reduce hunger, they may not eliminate it completely. For example, Food Stamp Program participants are expected to use one-third of their net income to supplement the food purchasing power of their food

stamps. If those supplemental funds were reallocated to pay utility bills or other necessities, the money could not be used for food. This shortfall could result in a lack of food and lead to hunger. Some gaps exist in Federal program coverage because all communities do not sponsor the range of Federal food assistance programs available to them. For instance, the Summer Food Service Program that provides meals to low-income children during school vacations is only available in a limited number of places.

Information Source

The results are based on a sample of 44,730 households that completed the survey interview. The results represent the entire population except the homeless or institutionalized who were not included in the survey. The survey questions refer to the household's situation over the past 30 days and the past 12 months. Only

the results for the 12-month period are reported here.²

The survey questions determine which households are experiencing hunger by asking about household behaviors that indicate inadequate access to food and an insufficient amount of food available in the household. These conditions are restricted to those related to economic circumstances and do not include hunger that results solely from illness, abuse, or voluntary dieting. Household respondents are asked about lack of food to prepare meals, cutting or skipping meals, and not eating for a whole day. Separate questions were asked about children's behavior that indicate inadequate access to food.

²At USDA, research is ongoing on hunger and food security thus methods are subject to change from knowledge gathered through the research process. All data are from the Current Population Survey, Food Security Supplement, April 1995.

Prevalence of Household Food Security Status by Selected Characteristics of Households, 1995

Characteristic	Total	Food secure	Food insecure, hunger not evident	Food insecure, hunger evident
	<i>Numbers in thousands</i>		<i>Percent</i>	
All households	100,210	88.1	7.8	4.1
With children under 18 years				
All households	38,113	82.5	12.3	5.3
White	30,438	84.6	11.1	4.3
Black	5,841	71.8	18.1	10.1
Hispanic ¹	4,475	69.6	21.6	8.8
Other	1,833	81.1	12.6	5.3
Married-couple families	26,841	88.5	8.8	2.8
Female head, no spouse	8,941	64.7	22.9	12.3
Male head, no spouse	2,332	81.4	12.0	6.6
All households by annual income				
Below \$10,000	14,977	67.7	19.6	12.7
\$10,000 to \$19,999	16,717	80.2	13.2	6.6
\$20,000 to \$29,999	15,625	89.0	7.7	3.3
\$30,000 to \$39,999	12,149	93.8	4.6	1.6
\$40,000 to \$49,999	8,539	95.8	3.0	1.2
\$50,000 and above	22,370	98.7	0.9	0.4

¹ Persons of Hispanic ethnicity can be of any race.

Source: Hamilton et al., 1997, *Household Food Security in the United States*, Food and Consumer Service, Alexandria, VA.

Conclusion

In 1995, hunger existed in 4.2 million households, or 4.1 percent of all households. In these households, one or more persons had an inadequate amount of food because of financial circumstances, affecting up to 11.2 million persons. In 817,000 of the 4.2 million households, hunger was severe, and 692,000 children lived in these households.

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